

DEER HOUND HUNTER FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY

DECEMBER 3, 2007; EMPORIA, VA

GROUP PROFILE

The Deer Hound Hunter focus group took place on December 3, 2007, in Emporia, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately twenty-five deer hound hunters were invited to attend the focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hound hunting community. Of those invited, twenty-three individuals attended the focus group meeting; twenty-two were males, one was a female; all were white.

All but one participant identified themselves as avid deer hound hunters, although many also hunted other species both with and without dogs. Some participants also participate in deer hound hunting in neighboring states. One person identified himself as being solely a bear hound hunter, and was likely misidentified as a deer hunter when invitees were selected. Most participants were members of one or more hunting clubs located east of the Blue Ridge. Many held leadership positions in these organizations. Most participants also were affiliated with other sporting groups or kennel clubs. Comments made during this focus group meeting, and summarized in this report, do not necessarily reflect the views of all members of these organizations; however, it is informative to note the breadth of interests involved.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The focus group lasted approximately two hours (7:00 – 9:00 PM). During that time, participants responded to a series of questions (indicated in bold below) posed by the facilitator; these questions are similar in purpose and general content to those being asked at all 16 focus group sessions. A summary of responses from meeting participants is provided below, including selected direct quotes that help illustrate particular themes or key points in that discussion.

How important is hound hunting for you compared to other types of hunting or recreation that you and your family take part in? Do you hunt deer with and without hounds?

All participants indicated that hunting was very important to them. Many participants have participated in hound hunting for their entire lives, while others had come to the activity as adults.

“It’s a way of life. I started goin’ hunting with my dad when I was three years old, and I killed my first deer when I was 6. And been hunting with dogs ever since.”

“It’s very important. I’m a little bit different from most of the guys here. I’m a transplant. I got here about fifteen years ago and when I did I linked up with some guys at work that, they’re generational hunters. I hunted with three different generations of guys who ran dogs.”

What are the two or three most important aspects of hunting with hounds to you?

Participants described hound hunting as a way of life, a source of family heritage and tradition, and a “spiritual” pursuit. Participants stressed the service that hunting, especially hunting deer with hounds, provides to the Commonwealth, as a tool for managing deer populations. In addition, participants noted that hound hunting entails a significant commitment of resources—both financial, energy, and time—to raise and care for the dogs, travel, and participate in the activity. Many indicated that the dogs were a crucial aspect of the activity, asserting that they would not hunt without the dogs.

“The game department even put a little thing in the game laws book this year, that if you kill a buck this year, you’ve killed one deer in the next ten years. If you kill one doe this year, you’ve taken two hundred deer out of the herd over the next ten years. So, if you don’t use the dogs, you not gonna be killing the does, or the bucks, or anything that you’re killing now and the population is just going to keep multiplying, and multiplying, and multiplying and, like the man down there said, you gonna be having more accidents with cars, they gonna be eating the people’s shrubs.”

“I got twenty-six dogs and everything with my family and my children, everything is planned around hunting season....You can’t explain it to people who aren’t aware of how things work when hunting season gets here. You know, businesses in the area, and people take time off, and businesses allow for people to have more time off in the local counties: New Brunswick, Greenville, Southampton. And I can only speak of those counties because they’re really the ones I know the best....It’s just a way of life, I don’t know any better way to put it.”

“We trained our dogs together, we have two dogs, we trained them together. And, to hear those dogs, bring them in, have them light off—we run Walkers—that is one of the most exciting things, the greatest thing. And to share that with your children is amazing. He shot his first deer off the dog that he trained which, to him, was the most, I mean, you want to see pride, you should see his face...Those hounds are like our children. And to get them out and get them exercise and to watch your children work with your dogs is, you know, it brings great, great pride to me.”

“I drive a Ford pickup with 130,000 miles on it. If I got rid of them dogs, I could buy me a new one tomorrow, ‘cause I spent enough to buy one this year. And I think that really ought to explain what they mean to me. I spend a lot of money and I enjoy every day.”

What do you believe to be the most important issues facing hunters who use hounds today?

Rather than immediately identifying issues critical to hound hunters, participants instead raised a series of questions about why this study was being undertaken. Prominent among this questioning was a discussion of the economic importance of hunting, in general, and hound hunting, in specific, to the state of Virginia. Participants also wanted to know how many complaints actually were filed against hound hunting and whether the validity of those complaints truly was investigated. Overall, many participants expressed skepticism about the need for a study about hound hunting issues.

“I just don’t understand how these complaints have caused this thing to balloon up and everybody’s, you know, going crazy, looking to make laws and going to legislation and you know, at some point in time, this thing went south and went quick and I’m like y’all, I’m just wondering how did it go that fast.”

Participants speculated that there might be several reasons for the concerns/complaints that have surfaced. They acknowledged that there are “bad apples” in the hound hunting community and that hound hunters need to do a better job of “policing our own ranks.”

In the areas where you hunt, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in availability of lands for hunting with hounds? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in land ownership, changes in attitudes of land owners, a combination of the two, or other factors?

Participants described how residential and commercial development in rural parts of Virginia was encroaching upon and substantially fragmenting the parcels they once hunted. The people who were buying tracts and moving in often do not recognize, appreciate, or share the values and traditions historically characteristic to the places in which they now live. Participants also agreed that conflicts do exist between hound hunters and hunters who do not use hounds (i.e., those who own or have bought land in these rural parts of Virginia specifically to hunt deer on).

“You come out of the city, you bought a farm in the middle of a block that’s been dog hunted as long as I can remember. The last time I checked, I don’t have a single dog that can read; if it has, it hasn’t proven it to me. He owns about 110 acres. I asked him, I said, “Well, what can we do to make it right?” Well, he tells you one thing outta this side of his mouth and then turns around and tells you something different out the other side of his mouth. He’s not against dog hunting, but he don’t want them on there the first two weeks of hunting season. ‘Cause he bow hunts....They don’t realize, they moved into our way of life, we didn’t move into their way of life.”

“So we have a lot of people from the city and up north who move down here for retirement homes. They don’t understand our way of life. And, like he says, you know, they’ll buy a lot. Some of the developments are easy to work with. You can communicate

with a lot of landowners if you go out and do PR work and communicate with them... Most people are so small minded that they say oh it terrorizes me and my children to see, you know, somebody standing with a gun."

"I have tried to get our county to agree that they need to have orientation class for anybody who wants to come and live in our county and I want to be the teacher because they don't understand farming, to start with. They come here because our taxes were cheaper, until they got here. Because then they got to have a new school and they want beside road garbage pick-up and street lights. And now, they are trying to get a leash law in Southampton County which we are, were, and have been, the top five counties in deer kills in the state. And we got that caliber person coming to our County that lives in a subdivision with 600 homes, is ticked off at their neighbor because their dog came over there and peed on their azalea and it died and they don't think about anything else. So, I want 'em to have to sign an affidavit that says they understand what goes on in this County, they have no reason to complain. And if you don't like what goes on now, don't come here."

A perception among some participants was that existing laws were not being enforced equitably in some places, which fostered a feeling among hound hunters that they are "second rate citizens." Given some of the changes to hound hunting regulations that recently have been made or discussed in other southeastern states, and the fact that this study has been initiated here in Virginia, some participants obviously were concerned and defensive. One participant wondered why more positive aspects of hound hunting are never publicized.

"Every time you see something in the paper, it's always negative. Where's the positive? A group of houndsmen, last weekend, put on a hunt in a fox pen for two kids that their parents carry them to the hospital weekly. Their hospital bills are \$2000.00 a month. We gave them \$3500.00 in cash for their expense. Now, where is that in the paper?"

What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues?

The participants acknowledged that the best way to address issues and concerns is to be proactive.

"It's time we become proactive. Because regardless of the fact that we're justified or we haven't done anything wrong, odds are, most everyone in here represented tonight, aren't the problem....It's those who don't come out here and stand up for this that is our problem. They're not going to change until we start putting pressure on them or we implement something to make people, or at least to get us all in the same line of thinking. But, we do need to be proactive. I hate to start talking about legislation, more laws, more permits. I hate to even talk about that. But, it's almost inevitable. It's coming. It's coming. You know, and if we don't do something. They're going to shove it down our throats and we ain't going to be able to swallow it."

SUMMARY

Overall, participants in the Emporia deer hound hunter focus group were passionate about hound hunting. They all expressed a deep love for the dogs they hunt with and a strong commitment to their time-honored activity. Most participants had been affected, either directly or indirectly, by some form of encroachment and fragmentation from the spread of development in areas where they live and hunt. This encroachment, they indicated, seemed to be at the root of conflicts between hound hunters and other citizens that exist today. Although some participants ardently wanted to fight to maintain their rural communities and the existing traditional practices of hound hunters, others recognized that times have changed and were more willing to accept that a proactive approach would be needed to craft positive solutions to today's emerging issues.